

God: The Ultimate Webcam

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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This morning's sermon is about righteousness. It's about being righteous. About being right, not in argument, but with God. Many of us want to think of ourselves as righteous, as having a rightness about us. *How good are you?*

Try this simple test. If you can start the day without caffeine, if you can get going without pep pills, if you can resist complaining to people about your troubles, if you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for it, if you can understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time, if you can overlook it when something goes wrong through no fault of yours and those you love take it out on you, if you can take criticism and blame without resentment, if you can ignore a friend's limited education and never correct him, if you can resist treating a rich friend better than a poor friend, if you can conquer tension without medical help, if you can relax without liquor, if you can sleep without the aid of drugs, and if you can say honestly that deep in your heart you have no prejudice against creed, color, religion or politics ... then, my friends, you are almost as good as your dog.

Jesus is teaching in these passages from Mark 7. Initially, in the early verses read this morning, he is engaging the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Quoting Isaiah 29, Jesus is saying that the Pharisees are talking the talk but not walking the walk. The crowd knows he's right. Their astonishment has to do with the fact that he is willing to say these things - most teacher types hang together, form a sort of club.

When he calls the people to him again in verse 14, he focuses on the issue of purity. In keeping with the passage from Isaiah 29, Jesus says that purity isn't a matter of *external* things, but a matter of the heart. He talks about food. He says in the verses that food isn't unclean until it works its way through the intestines, is evacuated, and enters the sewer.

Now, I want you to understand that, back then, this was a kind of 'bathroom joke.' The point of the joke, the point that the people who lived in that Middle Eastern culture would have got, is that external impurity is NOT what divides us from God. External impurity does not keep us from being holy. Instead, what is really unclean (tantamount to excrement), and what can really separate us from God, are our internal thoughts and motivations.

Look at the list in verses 21-23. Evil thoughts - Sexual Immorality - Theft - Murder - Adultery - Greed - Wickedness - Deceit - Lewdness - Envy - Slander - Arrogance - Folly. Each of these individual sins contains some violation of loving and trusting relationships. Each of these individual sins is initiated or inaugurated by a desire from within you or within me or within us, as people. Persons around us may be greedy or engaged in deceit or in slander but their behavior isn't strictly contagious - we may want to be like the Jones' but we don't have to.

This issue of righteousness hounds the thoughtful Christian like a plague. How to be right with God despite the desire towards sin. We are people reaching for something that is always just out of reach. And, of course, we assume that no one sees our sin because we have helped one another write the word 'accountability' off the list of good words. We assume no one sees our sin because everyone else is busy sinning on their own. We assume no one sees our sin because, somehow, we have bought into the notion that to name sin as sin is a rude thing to do - and we believe that being rude is far worse than sinning in the sight of God.

Of course, I question whether we really believe our sins are caught by God's camera. We believe that the CHP uses photo radar to snap a picture of our car (and a picture of our license number) as we zoom by. We believe that ATM's, most businesses and many non-profits, including day care centers, have mounted security cameras that watch us and detail our movements, but in these various examples we don't think that anyone will care, as long as we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. But do we think that God is watching? And if so, do we think God cares?

The passage this morning cautions us not to be like some Pharisees who pass themselves off as pious, always performing the correct religious rites, but whose inner lives were polluted with the stench of the graveyard. These people were all flash and form, performing outward works that people could see. Playing to the crowd, they went for the applause, inspiring Jesus to say, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.'

Now, you must understand that for most of those who heard Jesus say this, such a statement functionally *excluded* them from heaven. Why? Because no one was more righteous than the Pharisees! If heaven was reserved for only those whose righteousness *exceeded* that of the Pharisees, then there was no hope for most people.

But Jesus redefines what it means to be righteous. It means playing to the right camera. It means true holiness is not defined just by what we do, but by who we are. One need not *do* murder to *be* murderous. One need not *do* unkindness to *be* unkind. And so on. Acts of murder or unkindness or greed or slander or pride come from hearts that are murderous and unkind and greedy and prone to slander and pride. The one gives birth to the other. The acts of the hands are inexorably linked to the character of the heart.

We *think* we can get away with appearance-based virtual morality, and that no one will be the wiser. And to a very great extent we can - with people. Except when it comes to God. This One who loves us with a magnificent, generous, unselfish, bountiful tenderness is also the ultimate webcam, always watching, always seeing, always knowing way deeper than what's on the surface. God knows us to the depth of our heart, and knows that we are incapable of being righteous on our own. Thus, Jesus was sent to bridge the gap and to show us how to be whole people again. If you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, he doesn't make you independently righteous - he covers you with his righteousness, and provides you the strength to be right in every decision yet to be made.

As we move through this worship service towards Holy Communion, let's remember what our worship is all about. It is the bringing of our entire selves to Jesus, the offering of our lives. As the Psalmist says, 'thou hast no delight in sacrifice . . . the sacrifice the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.'

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